THE SEVEN AGAINST THEBES: INTRODUCTION

The Play: Date and Composition

Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* was first produced in 467 BCE, as the third play of a connected tetralogy consisting of *Laius, Oedipus, The Seven against Thebes,* and the satyr-drama *Sphinx.* Aeschylus won first prize that year in the competition. Second place went to Aristias with four plays actually composed by his father, Pratinas, who was a famous dramatist and one of Aeschylus' chief rivals; and third place went to Polyphrasmon, the son of another of Aeschylus' old rivals, Phrynichus, for a connected tetralogy about Lycurgus, a Thracian who resisted the cult of Dionysus rather as Pentheus did.

There are several references in our play to events and predictions from the first two plays of the tetralogy; and the plot of *The Seven against Thebes* itself constitutes the final phase of a long and drawn-out story, just as Aeschylus' *Eumenides* wraps up the whole *Oresteia.* Unfortunately, the ending of the play as we have it looks as if it has been modified from what Aeschylus wrote and presented in 467 BCE. Most modern scholars are convinced that the play was extensively rewritten in order to align it with the plot-line of Sophocles' *Antigone* (which was first produced some fifteen years after Aeschylus' death). As a result, the ending in the surviving manuscripts appears to diverge significantly from the plot trajectory of Aeschylus' original play. This uncertainty about the ending makes our reconstruction of the rest of the trilogy all the more difficult and speculative. But for the most part *The Seven against Thebes,* the second-earliest of Aeschylus' surviving dramas, has a simple structure, and its action and meaning are relatively easy to follow.

The Myth

The story of the doomed descendants of King Labdacus of Thebes—Laius, Oedipus, and Oedipus' sons, Eteocles and Polynices—and of the tribulations endured by the city of Thebes as a result of this family's incest and murders was

quite famous and often recounted in early Greek literature. For example, it figured in epic poems, now lost, attributed to Homer or one of his successors, and in many lyric poems, including one from the sixth-century poet Stesichorus of which fragments survive on papyrus. As with almost all Greek myths, there were many different versions and variations of the story, but the main outlines remain fairly consistent: King Laius and his wife, Jocasta (sometimes she is given a different name), are informed by the oracle of Apollo that they must not have a baby (it seems that in Aeschylus' version Laius was told that the safety of the city depended on his remaining childless). But they do proceed to have a baby son anyway, who grows up to be Oedipus. Their reason for flouting the oracle's warning is only hinted at in *The Seven against Thebes* (lines 750–57), though it may have been explained more fully in one of the earlier plays of the trilogy. In some versions, Jocasta got Laius drunk and then seduced him into having intercourse; in others, Laius' excessive sexual appetite led him astray. When the baby is born, it is taken out and abandoned to die. In Aeschylus' *Laius,* apparently the baby was placed in a pot when it was exposed, but we do not have any details of how his rescue and upbringing were managed (though it is quite likely that these details were different from Sophocles' version in *Oedipus the King).*

In due course, Oedipus encounters his real father at a crossroads, though neither recognizes the other. They fight and Oedipus kills Laius. He then comes to Thebes, which is being terrorized by the monstrous Sphinx. Oedipus solves the Sphinx's riddle and is hailed as the new king by the Thebans, which entails marrying the widow of the recently deceased ruler—no one knows that she is his mother. In most versions of the story Oedipus and Jocasta have four children: two boys, Polynices and Eteocles, and two girls, Antigone and Ismene. Eventually, the truth about Oedipus' identity (and the parricide and incest) is discovered. What happens next varies from one version to another. In some accounts, Jocasta commits suicide; in others not. In some, Oedipus continues to be the king of Thebes; in others he goes into exile or is deposed from the throne but remains in Thebes. In some, he blinds himself: it is not known when or by whom this detail of self-blinding was invented (it is mentioned in *The Seven against Thebes,* lines 778–84).

The ghastly problems continue into the next generation, with Oedipus' two sons quarreling violently about the succession. (In some versions of the story, including Euripides' *Phoenician Women,* Oedipus is still alive throughout their dispute; in others, including Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone,* as well as Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes,* he has already died.) Again, different

accounts exist of this quarrel and its consequences, though all include reference to Oedipus' laying a curse on his two sons. The curse, which in *The Seven against Thebes* is described as a "Fury," like the curses of Clytaemestra in the *Eumenides,* entails that the two brothers will never be able to divide their inheritance and the kingdom peacefully, but will end up killing one another. An arrangement is made between them: in some versions, they agree to alternate the rule annually, but Eteocles then refuses to relinquish the throne after his first year is over; in other versions, Polynices agrees to take a large share of movable property, while Eteocles becomes the permanent king of Thebes. We do not know how this issue was handled in Aeschylus' trilogy. But in all versions, Polynices leaves Thebes to live for a while in Argos. There he marries Argeia, the daughter of the Argive king, Adrastus, and Polynices persuades the Argives to provide him with an army, with the intention of gaining the Theban throne by force.

This is the point at which *The Seven against Thebes* begins. Polynices and six other champions from Argos (the "Seven against Thebes") are about to attack the city at its seven gates, while Eteocles is busy organizing the city's defense. As the messenger describes the opposing champions in turn, Eteocles dispatches six Theban champions to match them, one at each gate, countering each of the enemies' boasts and shield emblems with the most appropriate opponent. He ends up selecting himself as the seventh champion—so that he will face his own brother Polynices at the seventh gate. In due course it is reported by a messenger that in the ensuing battle the two brothers have met face to face and have killed one another. Still, the Argive invaders are repelled and the city is not captured.

Most scholars believe this is where Aeschylus' play and trilogy properly end: the ruling dynasty of the Labdacids has been destroyed, but the city of Thebes has survived. It has been emphasized throughout that both brothers share an identical fate, just as their father had cursed them. If this is the original ending, then this drama would conclude, as many do, with choral lamentation over the bodies. But in the text of the play contained in our medieval manuscripts, the plot suddenly takes a new and unexpected turn near the end: Antigone and Ismene, Oedipus' two daughters—who have not been mentioned at all during earlier scenes—arrive on stage; a herald informs everyone that the new ruler, Creon (who has also not been previously mentioned), has issued an edict granting to one brother, Eteocles, an honorific civic burial while the other, Polynices, is to be left unburied for the animals and birds to devour. At this point Antigone announces that she will defy Creon's edict and go and bury Polynices herself, even at the risk of execution. There the play ends, with no further resolution of this new set of issues. Most

modern scholars believe that this final scene is a later revision of Aeschylus' original play in order to align it with Sophocles, and that in his original trilogy Antigone and Ismene did not appear at all.

The Remains of the Trilogy and Tetralogy

Of the first two plays of the tragic trilogy, we possess only tiny scraps. From *Laius* there is a reference to the "pot" in which the newborn Oedipus was placed, and a grisly mention of a murderer who tasted and spat out his victim's blood. One of the plays appears to have contained a messenger speech in which the meeting of Laius and Oedipus was described. Three lines survive:

> We were traveling along the road, and came
> to a three-way junction of the wagon tracks,
> as we were passing by the meeting of roads at Potniae.

For the rest, we have to imagine the content of those plays from what we know of the myth and—especially—from clues provided by the third play. *The Seven against Thebes* contains several references to Oedipus' curse and also to a dream, both of which seem to have been delivered in riddling fashion. In particular, mention is made of a "Scythian stranger" and a "Chalyb" (referring to the remote Scythian tribe that was credited by the Greeks with first inventing ironworking), who will assist the two brothers in dividing up the land inherited from their father. The audience understands that this prediction, presumably mentioned also in the preceding play, refers to the iron—the swords—with which they will kill each other, and that their inheritance will consist simply of graves in the Theban earth. But the chorus arrives at this conclusion only after Eteocles has gone off to confront his brother at the seventh gate. As they sing about their new realization (720–91), they also mention the original oracle of Apollo to Laius and Jocasta, their disastrous disobedience, Oedipus' discovery of his parricide, his self-blinding, and his cursing of his sons. Thus the buildup that has occupied most of the play, toward Eteocles' decision to assign himself as seventh champion to face his own hated brother in battle, culminates in this moment of recognition that the third and final phase of this family's dreadful history is now coming to its destined close.

As for the fourth play, the satyr-drama *Sphinx,* we know nothing for certain about its plot and possess only two short fragments. Athenian vase paintings

depicting the Sphinx engaging with a group of satyrs probably reflect Aeschylus' play, but do not allow us to reconstruct it in any detail.

Transmission and Reception

The Seven against Thebes was apparently one of Aeschylus' best-known plays throughout the fifth century BCE. This play (and *Sphinx* too) is mentioned conspicuously in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, and Euripides borrowed extensively from it in his *Phoenician Women*. After that, Aeschylus' play seems to have been quickly and almost permanently eclipsed in antiquity by the popularity of Euripides' more action-packed version, as also, to a lesser extent, by Sophocles' plays on Oedipus and Antigone. Nor does it appear that performances of connected trilogies were staged in theaters after the fifth century; so *The Seven against Thebes,* presumably in its current, adapted form, was catalogued and read separately from *Laius* and *Oedipus*. Aeschylus' plays in general were less widely read in schools or for pleasure than the plays of Sophocles or (especially) Euripides; most of them gradually ceased to be copied at all and thus faded into oblivion. When the time came to make a selected edition of seven Aeschylean plays (in the Roman period, perhaps for school use), *Seven against Thebes* was included, but none of the other plays of its trilogy.

The play survived into the Byzantine and Renaissance era and along with *The Persians* and *Prometheus Bound* became one of the triad of Aeschylean plays that were copied frequently during the twelfth to fifteenth centuries. As a result, some of the manuscripts of the play contain quite extensive marginal comments (scholia). There is little sign, however, that any authors or visual artists between the time of Euripides and the nineteenth century were much influenced by *The Seven against Thebes,* even though many versions of the Oedipus story and the mutual killing of his sons continued to be told and depicted. It was only with the rise of German Romanticism, and the consequent resurgence of enthusiasm for Aeschylus' archaic style and more direct and simple dramaturgy, that *The Seven against Thebes* came back into its own and was recognized as an early masterpiece of Western drama. The play is not often performed, mainly because of its rather static quality, with pairs of long descriptive speeches and limited stage action. Yet *The Seven against Thebes* has come to be admired for presenting the earliest, almost archetypical, example of a "tragic choice" in which the hero contemplates grim alternatives before coming to accept, even embrace, his overdetermined commitment to the inevitable path to ruin. Critics have noted how

Aeschylus' text seems to leave the nature of this choice ambiguous—that is, whether Eteocles' choice of Theban champions, including himself, has already been made, or is actually taking place during the extended discussion with the Messenger. Is it the hero, or the gods, who bring about the brothers' encounter at the seventh gate?

Few adaptations or productions of the play have been attempted outside of college campuses. Notable are the adaptation by Cuban playwright Antón Arrufat (1968), the production of Aeschylus' play in Modern Greek by Karolos Koun (1975), and the hip-hop adaptation by Will Power *(The Seven,* 2003; 2006 with choreography by Bill T. Jones). Aeschylus' play also doubtless had an influence on Akira Kurosawa's classic *Seven Samurai* and John Sturges' *The Magnificent Seven.*

THE SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

Characters°

ETEOCLES, son of Oedipus, and now ruler of Thebes
MESSENGER
CHORUS of Theban women
ANTIGONE, sister of Eteocles
ISMENE, sister of Eteocles
HERALD

Scene: Thebes. Statues of gods stand near the center of the orchestra.

(Enter Eteocles with attendants from the side,
to confront a crowd of Thebans.)

ETEOCLES

You citizens of Cadmus, there is need
for good and timely counsel from the one
who watches over the progress of the ship
and guides the rudder, his eye not drooped in sleep.
For if we win success, god is the cause,
but if—may it not chance so—there is disaster,
throughout the town, voiced by its citizens,
a multitudinous much-repeated prelude
cries on one name "Eteocles" with groans:
may Zeus the Protector keep this from the city
of Cadmus, proving faithful to his title.
You all must help her now—both you who still
are short of your full manhood and you who

have bodies grown to greater bulk and strength—
each of you to such duties as befit you:
help the city, help the altars of your country's gods;
save their honors from destruction;
help your children, help Earth your mother.
She reared you, on her kindly surface, crawling
babies, welcomed all the trouble of your nurture,
reared you to live here and to carry a shield
in her defense, loyally, against such needs as this.
And up to this day god kindly has inclined
for us who have been held in siege so long:
the war, with gods' help, goes quite favorably.
But now the prophet, tending the oracular birds
with skill infallible, through ears and mind—
no need of fire—the master of these prophecies,
says the enemy frames a plot this night
for the greatest Achaean assault upon us.
All to the battlements, to the gates of the towers!
Haste, in full armor, man the breastworks:
stand on the scaffolding and at the exit gates
be firm, abide, your hearts confident:
fear not that mighty mob of foreigners.

(Exit crowd of Thebans, to the side.)

God will dispose all well.
I have sent scouts and spies upon that host,
who will not—well I know it—make the journey
vainly; and by their information
I shall be armed against enemy stratagems.

(Enter Messenger from the other side.)

MESSENGER

Eteocles, great lord of the Cadmeans,
I come bringing a clear word about the army
out there, and about the way things stand: myself
I have seen the things that I speak of.
There were seven men, fierce regiment commanders;
they cut bulls' throats into an iron-rimmed
shield, and with hands touched the bulls' blood,
taking their oaths by Ares and Enyo,
and by the bloodthirsty god of Terror,
either to smash and lay your city level
with the ground, sacked, or by their death to make
a bloody paste of this same soil of yours.
Remembrances of themselves for parents at home
their hands have hung upon Adrastus' chariot:
their tears ran down,
but never a word of pity was in their mouths.
Their spirits were hard as iron and ablaze
breathed courage: war looked through their lion eyes.
You will not wait long for confirmation
of this my news; I left them casting lots
how each should lead his regiment against your gates.
In view of this, choose the best men within your city
and set them at the entrance gates—quickly,
for near already the armed host of Argives
comes in a cloud of dust, with flecks of white,
panted from horses' lungs, staining the ground.
You, like the skillful captain of a ship
barricade your town before the blast of Ares
strikes it in storm: we already hear the roar
of the armed land wave. Take quickest opportunity
for all these things and I for the rest

will keep my eye, a trusty day watcher.
Thanks to my clear reports you shall know whatever
happens outside the gates, and come to no harm.

(Exit Messenger, to the side.)

ETEOCLES

O Zeus and Earth and gods that guard the city,
and mighty curse, the fury of my father,
do not root out this city of mine, do not
give her to ruin and destruction, do not
give her to capture nor her homes and hearths.
This is a town that speaks with a Greek tongue.
City and land of the Cadmeans are free:
do not bind her in slavish yoke; be her protector.
I think I speak for everybody's good,
for a city prospering gives honor to the gods.

(Exit Eteocles to one side. Enter the Chorus from the other side.)

CHORUS [*singing*]

My worries are great and fearful: I cry aloud:°
the army has left the camp and runs free.
Look at this forward-rushing river, the great tide of horsemen!
I see a cloud of dust, sky-high, and am convinced;
a messenger clear and truthful, though voiceless.
Trampling hoofs on the earth of my country,
the sound approaches my ears.
It floats, it roars
like a resistless mountain waterfall.
O gods, O goddesses, turn aside
the trouble raised!

Over the walls comes the noise;
the army of the white shield springs forward,
well equipped, hastening upon our city.
Who will protect us? Who will be our champion,
what god or goddess?
Shall I kneel at the images of the gods?
O Blessed Ones, throned in peace,
it is time to cling to your images.
Why delay and wail too much?
Do you hear or do you not the rattle of shields?
When, if not now, shall we hang
robes and garlands on your statues, supplicating?
I see the sound—the clatter of many spears!
What will you do, Ares,
ancient lord of this country,
will you betray your own land?
O spirit of the golden helmet, look down upon us,
look down upon a city
which once you dearly loved.

STROPHE A

City-guarding gods of our land, come, come all of you,
look upon us, a band of virgins,
suppliants against slavery!
Around our city the wave of warriors, with waving plumes,
roars; blasts of the war god stir them.
Ah, Zeus, Father all-ruling, all-fulfilling,
protect us at all costs from capture by our foes!
For the Argives are encircling Cadmus' city;
fear of their warlike arms dismays us.°
There is murder in the clanging harnesses
and the bits between their horses' jaws.

Seven proud captains of the host,
with harness and spear,
have won their place by lot;
they stand champions at seven gates.

ANTISTROPHE A

O powerful battle-loving daughter of Zeus,
save our city, Pallas!
And the horse-loving ruler of the sea,°
king of the trident, Poseidon,
grant deliverance from fear, deliverance.
You, Ares, ah! Protect the city that bears Cadmus' name;
show your care for it, in manifest presence.
And Cypris, who are our ancestress,
turn destruction away. We are sprung from your blood
and we approach you and cry
with prayers for the ears of the gods.
And you, wolf god, be a very wolf
to the enemy host; and you, daughter of Leto,
make ready your bow.

STROPHE B

Ah, ah,
the rattle of chariots round the city: I hear it.
O Lady Hera,
the groaning axles of the loaded wheels!
Beloved Artemis,
the air is mad with the whirr of spears!
What will happen to our city, what will become of it,
what is the end that the gods are bringing?

ANTISTROPHE B

Ah, ah,
there comes a shower of stones on the top of the battlements!
O beloved Apollo!
There is the rattle of bronze-bound shields at our gates!
O son of Zeus
from whom comes war's fulfilment
in the battle's holy outcome!
O Athena, blessed queen, champion of the city,
protect your seven-gated home!

STROPHE C

O gods all-sufficient,
O gods and goddesses, perfecters,
protectors of our country's forts,
do not betray this city, spear-won,
to a foreign-tongued enemy.
Hear O hear the prayers, hand outstretched,
of these maidens supplicating in justice.

ANTISTROPHE C

O beloved spirits
that encompass our city to its deliverance,
show how much you love it:
bethink you of the public sacrifices,
as we have thought of you, rescue us.
Remember, I pray you, the rites
with loving sacrifice offered by this city.

(Enter Eteocles from the side.)

ETEOCLES

You insupportable creatures, I ask you,

is this the best, is this for the city's safety,
is this enheartening for our beleaguered army,
to have you falling at the images
of the city's gods crying and howling,
an object of hatred for all people with sense?
Neither in evils nor in fair good fortune
may I share a dwelling with the tribe of women!
When she's triumphant, hers is confidence
that others cannot deal with; when afraid,
a greater evil both for home and city.
So now, running wild among the citizenry
you have shrieked them into spiritless cowardice,
as outside our gates, the enemy gains strength
while we, within, are by ourselves undone.
All this you may have, for living with women!
Now if there is anyone that will not hear
my orders, be he man or woman or in between,
sentence of death shall be decreed against him
and public stoning he shall not escape.
Affairs outside are a man's province: let no
woman debate it: within doors, do no mischief!
Do you hear me or not? Or are you deaf?

CHORUS [*singing in alternation with Eteocles, who speaks in response*]

STROPHE A

Dear son of Oedipus, the bumping rattle of the chariots,
rattle, rattle, I am afraid when I hear,
when the naves of the axles screech in their running,
when the fire-forged bits speak ringingly,
rudder oars in horses' mouths.

ETEOCLES

What—shall the sailor, then, who leaves the stern
and runs to the prow find any device for safety
when his vessel is foundering in the sea waves?

CHORUS

ANTISTROPHE A

But it was to the images of the gods,
the ancient images, I ran, trusting in the gods,
when the stony blizzard crashed upon our gates:
that was when I leaped up in fear and betook myself to prayer
to the Blessed Ones, for our city,
that they may make their strength its protection.

ETEOCLES

For protection pray that our towers hold off
the enemy's spears. That shall be as the gods dispose.°
But the gods, they say, of a captured town desert it.

CHORUS

STROPHE B

Never in my lifetime, never may this assembly
of gods desert us: never may I live to see
this city overrun, an enemy soldiery
putting the torch to it.

ETEOCLES

Do not call upon the gods and then take foolish counsel.
Obedience is mother to success,
and wife of salvation—so runs the proverb.

CHORUS

ANTISTROPHE B

This is true, but the strength of god is still greater.
Oftentimes when someone is hopelessly sunk
in misfortune, a god raises him, even from the greatest trials
with the clouds hanging high above his eyes.

ETEOCLES

But it is men's part, the sacrifice, the consultation
of the gods, when the enemy assaults us;
it is yours to be silent and stay within doors.

CHORUS

STROPHE C

It is thanks to the gods that we have our city
unconquered; it is thanks to them
that our towers reject the mob of foemen.
What should be resented in these words?

ETEOCLES

I do not grudge your honoring the gods.
But lest you turn our citizens into cowards,
be quiet and not overfearful.

CHORUS

ANTISTROPHE C

It was but now that I heard the noise
and the confusion, so that trembling
in fear I came to this citadel,

this honored and sacred seat.

ETEOCLES

If you shall learn of men dying or wounded,
do not be eager to anticipate it with cries,
for slaughtered men are Ares' favorite food.

CHORUS LEADER [*now speaking*]

The snorting of horses! There, I hear it.

ETEOCLES

Do not listen; do not hear too much.

CHORUS LEADER

Our city groans from its foundation: we're surrounded.

ETEOCLES

It's sufficient for me to think of this, not you.

CHORUS LEADER

I am afraid: the din at the gates grows louder.

ETEOCLES

Silence! Do not speak of this throughout the city.

CHORUS LEADER

O blessed assembly, do not betray this fort.

ETEOCLES

Damnation! Can you not endure in silence?

CHORUS LEADER

Fellow-citizen gods, grant me not to be a slave.

ETEOCLES

You're enslaving yourselves, and me, and all the city.

CHORUS LEADER

O Zeus, all-mighty, your bolt upon our foes!

ETEOCLES

O Zeus, what a tribe you have given us in women!

CHORUS LEADER

Useless too are men, when their town's been captured.

ETEOCLES

These are ill-omened words, when your hands are on the images!

CHORUS LEADER

Fear captures my tongue, and my spirit is quite gone.

ETEOCLES

Grant me, I pray you, the small thing I ask.

CHORUS LEADER

Speak it quickly, that I may know at once.

ETEOCLES

Silence, you wretches, don't frighten your friends.

CHORUS LEADER

I am silent; with others I'll endure what is fated.

ETEOCLES

I like this word better than those before.
Furthermore, get you away from the statues,
and being so, utter a better prayer:
"May the gods stand as our allies." So first hear
my prayer and then offer your own—
a holy gracious paean of victory,
the cry of sacrifice, as is Greek custom,
joy to our friends, dissolving fear of foes.
Gods of the city and community,
lords of its fields and its assembly places;
springs of Dirce, waters of Ismenus—
to you my vow:
if all go well with us, if the city is saved,
my people shall redden your hearths with the blood
of sacrificed sheep, and with the blood
of bulls slaughtered to honor the gods.°
I shall myself dedicate trophies,
spoils of my enemies, their garments fixed
on spear points, in your sanctuaries.

(To the Chorus.)

These be your prayers, unlamenting
with no vain wild panting and moaning:
for none of that will bring escape from destiny.
I will take six men, myself to make a seventh,
and go to post them at the city's gates,
opponents of the enemy, in gallant style,°
before quick messengers are on us and

their words of haste burn us with urgency.

(Exit Eteocles to the side.)

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

I heed him, but through fear
my spirit knows no sleep;
and neighbors to my heart,
anxieties kindle terror
of the host that beleaguers us,
as the all-fearing dove
dreads for its nestlings' sake
the snakes that menace them.
For some of them advance against our walls
with full armor and full ranks—
what will become of me?—
while others hurl jagged rocks
upon our citizens. O gods of Zeus's family,
I pray you—protect on every front
the city and the army,
the Cadmus-born!

ANTISTROPHE A

What country will you take in exchange,
better than this one,
if you abandon this deep-soiled land
to her enemies,
and Dirce's water, fairest to drink
of all that come from Poseidon
the earth-upholder, and Tethys' sons?

Therefore, you city-guarding gods,
upon the men outside our forts
rain slaughtering destruction
and ruin that will cast away their shields:
and for these citizens here
win glory and of the city
be the rescuers.
Stand fair in your places
to receive our shrill prayers.

STROPHE B

Pitiful it would be for this city, so ancient,
to be cast to the House of Death,
a spear-booty, a slave,
in crumbling ashes, shamefully
sacked by an Achaean man, with the gods' consent;
that its women be dragged away, ah!
captives, young and old,
dragged by the hair, as horses by the mane,
and their clothing torn about them.
The city wails as it's emptied out
and the captive spoil with mingled cries
is led to its doom.
This heavy fate is what I fear.

ANTISTROPHE B

Woeful is it for maidens new-reared and unripe,
before the marriage rites, to tread
this bitter journey from their homes.
I would say that even the dead
are better off than this.
Ah, unlucky indeed the fate

of a city captured—
here, there, everywhere
murder, fire, and rapine,
all the city polluted by smoke,
and the breath of Ares on it
maddened, desecrating piety, slaying the people.

STROPHE C

There is tumult through the town.
All around it hangs a towering net:
man stands against man with the spear and is killed.
Screams, bloody and wild, echo around,
from babies new-nourished at the breast.
The roving bands of pillagers are all brothers;
he that has plunder meets with another;
he that has none calls him that has none,
wishing to have a partner, eager for a share
neither less nor yet equal.
From such things what shall one predict?°

ANTISTROPHE C

All sorts of grain fallen,
strewn on the ground, pain
the eye, with fierce new owners.°
The great, profuse gifts of the earth
in reckless streams of waste are poured out.
The girls, new servants, new to misery,
must endure a war captive's bed,
the bed of a successful man.
Theirs the expectation of night's consummation
with the triumphant enemy,
as help for their tearful sorrows.

(Enter the Messenger, from one side.)

FIRST HALF-CHORUS [*speaking*]

Here, I think, friends, our scout comes bringing
some news of the enemy—hastily urging
the joints of his legs to carry him here.

(Enter Eteocles, from the other side.)

SECOND HALF-CHORUS [*speaking*]

And here is the king himself, the son
of Oedipus, in the nick of time to hear
the messenger's story. He too is in haste
and nimbly steps along.

MESSENGER

I can declare—
I know it well—the enemy's position:
how each at the gates has won by lot his station.
At the Proetid gate Tydeus now thunders
but dares not cross Ismenus' ford; the prophet
forbids. The sacrifices are unfavorable.
Tydeus, enraged and thirsting for the fight,
threatens, like serpents' hiss at noonday;
he strikes with abuse the wise seer, son of Oecles.
"Battle and death make him cringe
through cowardice"—so he shouts aloud
and shakes his threefold shadowing plumes,
the mane of his crested helm. Beneath his shield,
inside, ring brazen bells, a peal of terror,
and on the shield he bears this arrogant
device—a fashioned sky afire with stars.

In the shield's midst a glorious full moon,
night's eye, the eldest of the stars, stands out.
With such mad bragging and with overweening
trappings of war he roars along the banks
in love with battle, like the horse that chafes
against the bit, high-mettled, impatient, hearing
the trumpet's sound. Against this champion
whom will you set?
When the bolts are shot back at the Proetid gates,
who will be champion fit to deserve our trust?

ETEOCLES

No equipment of a man will make me tremble.
Devices on a shield deal no one wounds.
The plumes and bells bite not without the spear.
And for this night you speak of on his shield
glistening with all the stars of heaven—someone
may find his folly prophetic to himself.
For if in death night fall upon his eyes,
to him that bears this pompous blazonry
it shall be truly and most justly eloquent,
and he shall make his insolence prophesy
against himself.
I nominate against him
as champion of these gates to challenge Tydeus,
the worthy son of Astacus—right noble,
one honoring the throne of Modesty
and hating insolent words.
He's not a doer of anything shameful; and his way
is never a coward's. From those Sown Men
whom Ares spared his root is sprung—quite native
is Melanippus to this land. The outcome

shall Ares with his dice determine; but
Justice, blood of his blood, now sends him forth,
surely, to turn the enemy's spear away
from the mother that has borne him, his homeland.

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

May the gods grant
good luck to our champion,
since justly he comes forward,
a fighter for our city.
But I fear to look
upon the bloody ends of those dying
on behalf of those they love.

MESSENGER

Yes, may the gods grant him good luck.
At Electra's gates stands by lot Capaneus,
a giant this man, taller than the other,
and his threats breathe inhuman arrogance.
Our towers he menaces with terrors—Fortune
fulfill them not!°—for he declares he'll sack
our city with gods' favor or without it:
not even Zeus's weapon striking the earth
shall be obstacle to his purpose. The lightning
flashes and the thunderbolts he likened
to the sun's warm rays at noontide.
The device
he bears—a naked man that carries fire,
in his hands, ablaze, a torch all ready. In gold
are letters that declare "I'll burn the city."

Against this man send—who will meet him?
Who will await his threats and never tremble?

ETEOCLES

This man's boasts, too, beget us other gain.
For of the arrogance of vain men, the true
accuser is their own tongue. Capaneus
threatens to act—and is prepared to act—
in contempt of the gods; and giving exercise
to his mouth, in vain joy, up to heaven
mortal though he is, against Zeus sends his words,
shouted in swelling pride. I trust that to him
will justly come the bolt that carries fire
in no way like the sun's warm rays at noontide.
Against him, be his lips ever so insolent,
a man of fiery spirit has been stationed,
strong Polyphontes, a guardian trustworthy,
by favor of protecting Artemis
and of the other gods. Tell me another
that has his place by lot at another gate.

CHORUS [*singing*]

ANTISTROPHE A

Destruction on him that against the city
vaunts huge threats;
may the thunderbolt's blast restrain him
before he bursts into my house,
before he ravishes me from my maiden room.

MESSENGER

Now I shall speak of him that by lot won

next station at the gates. The third lot cast
jumped from the upturned brazen helmet
in favor of a third man, Eteoclus,
that he should lead his regiment in a charge
against the gates of Neïs. He wheels his mares
snorting in their nose bands, ready to charge the gate.
Pipes on the bridle bands filled with insolent
nostril breath whistle in a foreign note.
His shield, too, has its design—and not a small one—
a man in armor mounts a ladder's steps
to the enemy's town to sack it. Loud
cries also this man in his written legend,
"Ares himself shall not cast me from the tower."
Against him send some champion trustworthy
to turn the yoke of slavery from this city.

ETEOCLES

He's already sent—and may good luck go with him!
His boast is in his hands: he's Megareus,
Creon's son, and of the seed and race
of the Sown Men. He will never blench
at the furious neighing of horses nor yield the gates.
Either by death he'll pay his nurture's due
to his own land or he will capture two men
and city as depicted on the shield
and crown his father's house with the spoils of war.
On with another's boasts—don't begrudge me the story.

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE B

Good success to you, I pray,

O champion of my house,
and to the enemy ill success!
As with wild extravagance
they boast loudly against the city
with maddened heart, so may Zeus
the punisher look on them in wrath.

MESSENGER

Another, the fourth, holds the gate that neighbors
Onca Athena, and takes his station with a shout,
Hippomedon's vast frame and giant form.
He whirled a disc around—I mean the circle
of his shield—until I shuddered. I speak truth.
The armorer cannot have been a poor one
that put upon the shield this work of art—
Typhon hurling from his fiery mouth
black smoke, the flickering sister of fire;
and the rim that ran around the hollow boss
of the shield is solid wrought with coiling snakes.
The man himself cried out his warcry: he,
inspired by Ares, revels in violence
like a Bacchanal with murder in his glance.
Take good heed how you deal with such a man;
he boasts even now at the gate he will raise panic.

ETEOCLES

First, Onca Pallas, with her place beside
our city, neighbor to our gates, will hate
the fellow's violence and keep him off,
as it were a chill snake from her nestling brood.
And then Hyperbius, the stout son of Oenops,
has been chosen to match him man for man, right willing,

at fortune's need, to put his fate to question—
a man not to be reproached either in form
or spirit or in bearing of his arms.
Hermes has matched the two with excellent reason,
for man with man they shall engage as foes
and on their shields shall carry enemy gods.
The one has Typhon breathing fire, the other,
Hyperbius, has father Zeus in station
sitting upon his shield, and in his hand
a burning bolt.
No one has ever yet seen Zeus defeated.°
Such on each side are the favors of the gods;
we are on the winning side, they with the vanquished
if Zeus is truly mightier in war than Typhon.
According to the logic of the emblems,
Zeus on Hyperbius' shield should be our savior.

CHORUS [*singing*]

ANTISTROPHE B

My faith is strong that the one who has
Zeus's adversary on his shield,
the unloved form of the earth-born demon,
an image hated by men
and by the long-living gods,
shall lose his head before our gates.

MESSENGER

So may it prove. Now I speak of the fifth
that is stationed at the fifth, the Northern gate,
right by Amphion's tomb that sprung from Zeus.
By his spear he swears—and with sure confidence

he holds it more in reverence than a god,
more precious than his eyes—he will sack the town
of Thebes in despite of Zeus. Such the loud vaunt
of this creature sprung of a mountain mother, handsome,
something between a man and a young boy.
The beard is newly sprouting on his cheeks,
the thick, upspringing hair of youth in its bloom.
His spirit unlike his maiden name is savage,
and with a Gorgon look he now advances.
He too boasts high as he draws near our gates:
for on his brazen shield, his body's rounded
defense, he swings an insult to our city,
the Sphinx that ate men raw, cunningly wrought,
burnished, embossed, secured with rivets there;
a man she bears beneath her, a Cadmean,
so that at him most of our shafts shall fly.
When he comes to the battle, so it seems,
he will not play the petty shopkeeper
of war nor shame his lengthy journey here—
Parthenopaeus of Arcadia.
He lives among our enemy presently
and pays to Argos a fair wage for his keep,
with threats against our walls—may god not grant them!

ETEOCLES

May they themselves obtain what from the gods
they pray against us—they, and their impious boasts!
Then would they perish utterly and ill.
We have a man to encounter your Arcadian,
a man unboasting but his hand looks for
the thing that should be done—Actor, the brother
of him I spoke of earlier. He will not allow

a heedless tongue to flow within our gates
and to breed mischief, nor to cross our walls
one bearing on his enemy shield the likeness
of that most hateful Sphinx. And when the beast
is hammered hard and beaten outside our walls
she'll blame the man who tried to carry her in.
With the gods' will, what I say will turn out true.

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE C

The words go through my heart;
the hair stands upright on my head;
as I listen to mighty words
of impious boasting men.
If gods are gods, may they destroy them within our land!

MESSENGER

A sixth I'll tell you of—a most modest man
greatest in might of battle, yet a prophet:
strong Amphiaraus at the Homoloian gates
is stationed, shouting insults at strong Tydeus:
"Murderer, wrecker of your city, greatest
teacher of evil to Argos; of the Fury
a summoning herald; servant of bloodshed;
adviser to Adrastus of all these evils."
And then again with eyes uplifted calling
on your own brother, strong prince Polynices,
he dwells twice on the last part of his name,
"the one of much strife."°
And this is the speech to which his lips give utterance:
"Is such a deed as this dear to the gods,

and fair to hear and tell of for posterity,
for one to sack his native town, destroy
the gods of his own country, bringing in
an alien enemy host? What claim of justice
shall quench the guilt that wells up from your mother,°
and your fatherland destroyed by the spear
which your own zeal impelled—shall it be your ally?
But for myself I shall make fat this soil
a prophet buried under enemy ground.
Let us fight. The fate I look for is right honorable."
So spoke the prophet brandishing his round°
brazen shield. No device is on its circle.
He is best not at seeming to be such
but being so. Deep indeed is the furrow
of his mind from which he gathers fruit, and good
the counsels that do spring from it. For him
send out, I recommend, wise and good challengers,
for he is dangerous who reveres the gods.

ETEOCLES

Alas, the luck which among human beings
can join an honest man with impious ones!
In every enterprise is no greater evil
than bad companionship: there is no fruit
worth gathering from it. The field of doom
bears death as its harvest.
Indeed, a pious man, going on board
as shipmate of a crew of criminals
and of some mischief they have perpetrated,
has often died with the god-detested breed;
or a just man, with fellow citizens
themselves inhospitable, forgetful of the gods,

has fallen into the same snare as the unrighteous,
and smitten by the common scourge of god
has yielded up his life.
Even so this seer,
this son of Oecles, wise, just, good, and holy,
a prophet mighty, mingling with the impious—
against his better reason—with loud-mouthed
men who pursue a road long to retrace,
with Zeus's will shall be dragged to collective doom.
I think he will not even assault the gate—
not that he is a coward or faint of spirit—
but well he knows how he must die in the battle
if Loxias' prophecies shall bear fruit
(and either the god says nothing, or speaks what's true).
Yet still, against him, the mighty Lasthenes
we shall post in combat, an inhospitable
sentry, in mind an old man but a young one
in his body's vigor, in his swift-flying gaze,
and in his hand, not slow to take his spear
and drive it where the shield reveals a chink.
But success—for men that's the gift of god alone.

CHORUS [*singing*]

ANTISTROPHE C

Hear, O gods, our righteous prayers
and bring them to fulfilment, that
the city prosper, diverting
the horrors of war onto our invaders.
May Zeus strike them and slay them
with his bolt outside our walls.

MESSENGER

And now, the seventh at the seventh gate
I shall unfold—your own, your very brother.
Hear how he curses the city and what fate
he invokes upon her. He prays that once his foot
is set upon our walls, once he is proclaimed
the conqueror of this land, once he has cried
a paean of triumph in its overthrow,°
he then may close in fight with you and killing
encounter his own death beside your corpse.
Or if you live, that he may banish you—
in the selfsame way as you dishonored him—
to exile. So he shouts and calls the gods
of his race and of his fatherland to witness
his prayers—a very violent Polynices.
He bears a new-made, rounded shield, and on it
a twofold device, skillfully contrived:
a woman leading modestly a man
pictured as a warrior, wrought all in gold.
She guides him, and she claims that she is Justice;
and the inscription reads: I will bring him home,
and he shall have his city and shall walk
in his ancestral house.
Such are the signs.
But you yourself determine whom to send.
You shall not find a fault in my report:
but you determine how to steer the state.

ETEOCLES

Our family, the family of Oedipus,
by the gods maddened, by them greatly hated;
ah, my father's curses are now fulfilled!

But from me no crying and no lamentation,
lest grief arise yet harder to endure.
I can say about Polynices, so well named,
soon we shall know the pertinence of his sign,
whether his golden characters on the shield,
babbling, in wild distraction of the mind,
will indeed bring him home. This might have been,
if Justice, Zeus's virgin daughter, had stood
by his actions and his mind. But in his flight
out of the darkness of his mother's womb,
in his growth as a child, in his young manhood,
in the first gathering of his beard—no, never
did Justice look upon him nor regard him.
I do not think that now, as he comes to outrage
this fatherland of his, she will stand his ally—
or else she is falsely called Justice, joining
with a man whose mind conceives no limit in villainy.
In this I trust, and to the conflict with him
I'll go myself. What other has more right?
King against king, and brother against brother,
foe against foe we'll fight.
Bring me my greaves
to shield me from the lances and the stones.

CHORUS LEADER

O dearest son of Oedipus, do not
be like in temper to this dire speaker
of dreadful sayings. There are enough Cadmeans
to grapple with the Argives: such blood is expiable.
But for the blood of brothers mutually shed
there is no growing old of the pollution.

ETEOCLES

If a man suffer ill, let it be without shame;
this is the only gain when we are dead.
But for deeds both evil and disgraceful, never
will you speak a word of glory or of good.

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

What do you long for, child?
Let not the frantic lust
for battle, filling the heart,
carry you away. Expel
the evil passion at its birth.

ETEOCLES [*speaking*]

It is the god that drives this matter on.
Since it is so—on, on with favoring wind
this wave of hell that has engulfed for its share
all kin of Laius, whom Phoebus has so hated!

CHORUS

ANTISTROPHE A

Bitter-biting indeed
is the passion that urges you
to accomplish manslaying,
bitter in fruit,
where the blood to be shed is unlawful.

ETEOCLES

Yes, for the hateful black
curse of my beloved father
sits with dry and tearless eyes
and tells me first of gain and then of death.

CHORUS

STROPHE B

Resist its urging: coward
you shall not be called
if you rule your life well.
Out from your house the black-robed Fury
shall go, when from your hands
the gods shall receive a sacrifice.

ETEOCLES

We are already past the care of gods.
For them our death is the delightful offering.°
Why then delay, cringing at final destruction?

CHORUS

ANTISTROPHE B

Not when the chance is yours—
for in the veering change
of spirit though late
perhaps the god may change
and come with kinder breath.
Now his blast is full.

ETEOCLES

Yes, Oedipus's curses have fanned that blast.
Too true the vision of sleepy nightmares
showing division of my father's heritage.

CHORUS LEADER

Listen to women, though you like it not.

ETEOCLES

Speak then of what may be. But keep it short.

CHORUS LEADER

Don't go yourself on this path to the seventh gate.

ETEOCLES

No words of yours will blunt my whetted purpose.

CHORUS

Yet even bad victory the gods hold in honor.

ETEOCLES

No soldier should endure to hear such words.

CHORUS

Do you wish to reap as harvest a brother's blood?

ETEOCLES

If gods give ill, no man may escape their giving.

(Exit Eteocles to the side.)

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

I shudder at the goddess,
unlike all other gods,
who compasses destruction of the house,
utterly unforgetting, prophet of ill,
the Fury invoked by a father's curse.
I dread that it bring to pass
the furious invocations
of Oedipus astray in his mind.
This strife, death to his sons, spurs it on.

ANTISTROPHE A

A stranger grants them land allotment,
a Chalyb, Scythian colonist,
a bitter divider of possessions—
fierce-hearted Iron.

Yes, he has allotted them land to dwell in,
as much as the dead may possess:
no share theirs of the broad plains.

STROPHE B

When they die with mutual hand
mutually slaughtering
and earth's dust drinks
black clotted murder-blood,
who shall then give purification,
who shall wash away the stain?
O new evils of the house,
new mingled with the old!

ANTISTROPHE B

Old is the transgression I tell
but swift in retribution:
to the third generation it abides.
Three times in Pythian prophecies
given at the navel-of-earth
Apollo had directed
King Laius to die without child
and save his city so …

STROPHE C

… but he was mastered by loving folly
and begot for himself a doom,
father-killing Oedipus,
who sowed his mother's sacred soil,
whence he had sprung himself,
and endured a bloody root crop.
Madness was the coupler

of the crazed bridal pair.

ANTISTROPHE C

Now, as it were, a sea
drives on the waves of trouble:
one sinks, another rises,
triple-crested around the hull
of the city, and breaks in foam.
Our defense between is but a little thing
no bigger than a wall in width.
I fear that with our princes
our city may be subdued.

STROPHE D

For heavy is the settlement
of ancient curses, to fulfilment brought.
The destructive evils don't pass away.
Prosperity, grown fat for thriving men,
requires the jettisoning
of all goods, utterly.

ANTISTROPHE D

What man has earned such admiration
of gods and men that shared his city
and of the general throng of mortals,
as Oedipus—who ever had such honor
as he that from his land had banished
the man-snatching Sphinx?

STROPHE E

But then, when first he realized
the meaning of his dreadful marriage,

distraught with pain and maddened in heart
he brought a double harm to fulfilment.
With patricidal hand
he reft himself of eyes
that dearer to him were than his own children.°

ANTISTROPHE E

And on those children savage
maledictions he launched, ah!
for their cruel care of him
and wished they might divide
with iron-wielding hand his own possessions.
And now I fear
that the nimble-footed Fury is bringing those wishes to fulfilment.

(Enter Messenger from the side.)

MESSENGER

Take heart, daughters of Cadmus' land°: this city
has escaped the yoke of slavery. Fallen
are the vauntings of those monstrous men.
Our city's in smooth water now; though buffeted
by many assaults of the waves, it shipped no sea.
Our wall still stands protecting us, our gates
we barricaded with trustworthy champions.
For the most part all is well—at six of the gates.
The seventh the lord Apollo, Captain of Sevens,
took for himself: on Oedipus' offspring
he has fulfilled the ancient follies of Laius.

CHORUS LEADER

What new and awful thing concerns the city?°

MESSENGER

The men have died, killed by each other's hands.

CHORUS LEADER

Who? What do you mean? I'm terrified at your words.

MESSENGER

Get your wits and hear. Oedipus' two sons …

CHORUS LEADER

Ah, ah, the evils that I prophesied!

MESSENGER

In very truth, crushed to the ground.

CHORUS LEADER

They both lie there? Bitter though it be, yet speak.

MESSENGER

With brothers' hands they achieved their mutual murder.
The city is saved, but of the royal pair
the ground has drunk the blood shed each by each.
So all too equal was their guiding spirit,°
and surely he has destroyed this hapless family.
So here is store of sorrow and joy at once.
The city has good fortune, but its lords,
the two generals, have divided the possessions
with hammered iron of Scythia. They shall have
what land suffices for a grave, swept there
down the wind of their father's ill-fated curses.

(Exit Messenger.)

CHORUS [*chanting*]°

[*O great Zeus and spirits that guard*
the city, you protectors
that guard our walls:
shall I rejoice, shall I cry aloud
for our city's safety?
or for those wretched ones, luckless and childless,
our generals, shall I lament?
They have earned their name too well
and "men of strife" they have perished
through impious intent.]

[*singing*]

STROPHE A

O black curse consummated
on the race, the curse of Oedipus!
An evil chill assails my heart.
I raise the dirge at the tomb
like a maenad, hearing
of their blood-dripping corpses,
of their ill-fated death.
Ill-omened indeed
is this melody of the spear.

ANTISTROPHE A

It has worked to an end, not failed,
the curse called on them by their father of old.
The decisions of Laius, wanting in faith,
have had effect till now.

My heart is troubled for the city;
divine warnings are not blunted.
O full of sorrows, this you have done,
a deed beyond belief.
Woes worthy of groaning
have come in very truth.

(Enter attendants, carrying the bodies of Eteocles and Polynices.)°

MESODE A

Here is visible evidence of the messenger's tale.
Twofold our griefs and double
the ills these two men wrought;
double the fated sorrow
now brought to fulfilment.
What shall I say, but that
here sorrows abide at the hearth of the house?°
But rowing in lamentation, friends,
as the winds of woe keep blowing,
beat your head with rhythmic hands
and ply the speeding stroke which sends
forth across Acheron, over and over,
the black-sailed ship, untrodden by Apollo and sunless,
on its mission
to the unseen shore that welcomes all.
[*chanting*]°
[*Here they come to their bitter task,*
Ismene and Antigone,
to make the dirge for their brothers.
With true sincerity, I think,
from their deep bosoms,
they shall utter a song of grief that fits the cause.

Us it concerns to sing,
before their song,
the ill-sounding Furies' dirge,
and the hateful Hades paean.
O most luckless in your brothers
of all women that fasten the girdle about their robes,
I cry, I groan: there is no guile
in my heart to check my true dirge.]

FIRST HALF-CHORUS°

STROPHE B

O misguided ones,
faithless to friends, unwearied in evil,
who plundered your father's house
to your misery, with the spear.

SECOND HALF-CHORUS

Wretched indeed, who found wretched deaths
to the ruin of your house.

FIRST HALF-CHORUS

ANTISTROPHE B

O you that tore the roof
from your house, you that glimpsed
monarchy in bitter rivalry, now
at last you are reconciled—by the sword.

SECOND HALF-CHORUS

Too truly has that dread spirit,
the Fury of Oedipus,

brought all this to fulfilment.

FIRST HALF-CHORUS

STROPHE C

Stricken through their left sides,
stricken indeed,
through ribs born from a common womb.
Ah, strange ones,
alas for the curse
of death that answered death!

SECOND HALF-CHORUS

A straight thrust to house and body
delivered by unspeakable wrath,
by the doom invoked by a father's curse,
which they shared without discord.

FIRST HALF-CHORUS

ANTISTROPHE C

Through the city the sound of groaning;
the walls groan aloud;
the plain that loved them groans.
There remain for their descendants
the possessions for which
their bitter fate was paid,
for which their strife arose,
for which they found the end of death.

SECOND HALF-CHORUS

With bitterness of heart they shared

their possessions in equality:
but to their loved ones not without blame
is their arbitrator,
nor does Ares receive thanks.

FIRST HALF-CHORUS

STROPHE D

By the stroke of the sword they are as they are.
By the stroke of the sword there awaits them—what?
Equal shares in their ancestral tomb, says someone.

SECOND HALF-CHORUS

A shrill cry escorts them from their house,
a cry heartrending,
a cry for its own griefs, its own woes,
in anguish of mind with no thought of joy,
weeping tears from a heart that breaks,
for these our two princes.

FIRST HALF-CHORUS

ANTISTROPHE D

One may say over the bodies
of this unhappy pair:
much have they done to their fellow citizens,
and much to all the ranks of foreigners
who died in this devastating war.

SECOND HALF-CHORUS

Unlucky she that bore them
above all womankind

that are called by a mother's name.
She took as husband her own child
and bore these who have died,
their brotherly hands working each other's murder.

FIRST HALF-CHORUS

STROPHE E

Brotherly indeed in utter destruction,
in unkindly severance,
in frantic strife,
in the ending of their quarrel.

SECOND HALF-CHORUS

Their enmity is ended, in the earth
blood-drenched their life is mingled.
Very brothers are they now.
Bitter the reconciler of their feud,
stranger from over the sea,
sped hither by the fire,
whetted iron.
And a bitter, evil divider of possessions,
Ares, who made their father's curse
a thing of utter truth.

FIRST HALF-CHORUS

ANTISTROPHE E

They have their share, unhappy ones,
of Zeus-given sorrows:
beneath their bodies, earth
in fathomless wealth shall lie.

SECOND HALF-CHORUS

You who have made your race
blossom with many woes:
over you at last the curses
have cried their shrill lament,
and the race is turned to confusion and rout.
The trophy of destruction stands
at the gates where they were smitten,
and conqueror of the two,
the haunting spirit at last has come to rest.

MESODE B [*the two Half-Choruses singing in alternation*]

—You smote and were smitten …
—you killed and were slain.
—By the spear you killed …
—by the spear you died.
—Wretched in acting …
—wretched in suffering.
—Let the groans go forth …
—let the tears fall.
—You lie in death …
—having killed.

STROPHE F

—Woe!
—Woe!
—My mind is maddened with groans …
—with groans my heart is full.
Ah, ah, creature of tears …
—you too, all-miserable!
By hand of kin you died …
—and you killed one next of kin.

—A double sorrow to relate …

—a double sorrow to see.

—Two sorrows hard by one another …

—brother's sorrow close to brother's.

CHORUS [*singing in unison*]

O wretched Fate, giver of heavy grief,
awful shade of Oedipus,
black Fury,
truly you are a spirit mighty in strength!

ANTISTROPHE F

—Woe!

—Woe!

—Evils unfit to look upon …

—he showed us after banishment.

—He came not back when he had slain …

—This one came and lost his own life.

—This one died …

—and killed the other.

—Unhappy family!

—Unhappy deeds!

—Grievous sorrows of kindred …

—Grievous, thrice grievous sorrow.

CHORUS [*in unison*]

O wretched Fate, giver of heavy grief,
awful shade of Oedipus,
black Fury,
truly you are a spirit mighty in strength.

EPODE

—You have learned the lesson by experience.

—And you too have learned it, no whit later.

—When you returned to the city …

—yes, to face him with your spear.

—Deadly to tell …

—deadly to see.

—Pain …

—ill …

—to house and land …

—and most of all to me.

—O king, of grievous sorrows!

—O of all most rich in pain!

—O brothers possessed by evil spirits, in doom …

—oh, where shall we lay them in the earth?

—Oh, where their honor shall be greatest.

—Oh, sleeping by the side of their father to his hurt.

(Enter a Herald from the side.)°

HERALD

It is my duty to declare to you,
counselors of the people, the resolves
already taken and the present pleasure
of this Cadmean city.
Our lord Eteocles for his loyalty
it is determined to bury in the earth
that he so loved. Fighting its enemies
he found his death here. In the sight
of his ancestral shrines he is pure and blameless
and died where young men die right honorably.
These are my instructions to communicate

with respect to him. His brother Polynices,
or rather his dead body, you must cast out
unburied, for the dogs to drag and tear
as fits one who would have destroyed our country
had not some god proved obstacle to his spear.
Even in death he shall retain this guilt
against his gods ancestral whom he dishonored
when he brought a foreign host here for invasion
and would have sacked the city. So it is resolved
that he shall have, as his penalty, a burial
granted dishonorably by the birds of the air
and that no raising of a mound by hand
attend him nor high-pitched singing of a dirge.
Unhonored shall his funeral be by friends.
This is the pleasure of the Cadmean state.

ANTIGONE

But I to those Cadmean magistrates
declare: if no one else will dare to join me
in burying him, yet will I bury him
and take the danger on my head alone
when that is done. He is my brother. I
am not ashamed of this anarchic act
of disobedience to the city. Strange,
a strange thing is the common blood we spring from—
a mother wretched, a father doomed to evil.
Willingly then with one that would not will it,
live spirit with dead man in sisterhood
I shall bear my share. His flesh
the hollow-bellied wolves shall never taste.
Let that be no one's "pleasure or decree."
His tomb and burying place I will contrive

though but a woman. In the bosom folds
of my linen robe I shall carry earth to him.
And I shall cover him: let no one determine
the contrary. I am resolved—I shall
find means to bring this burial to pass.

HERALD

I forbid you to act so in defiance of the city.

ANTIGONE

I forbid you your superfluous proclamations.

HERALD

Harsh are the people once the danger's past.

ANTIGONE

Go on, be harsh. But he shall not go unburied.

HERALD

The city hates him: will you grace him with a tomb?

ANTIGONE

Long since the gods determined of his honor.°

HERALD

Not after he cast in peril this land of ours.

ANTIGONE

He suffered ill and was paying back what he suffered.

HERALD

This deed of his was aimed at all, not one.

ANTIGONE

Of all the gods Contention has final say.
But I shall bury him: spare me long speech.

HERALD

Have your own way: but I forbid the act.

(The First Half-Chorus stands with Antigone around Polynices' corpse.)

FIRST HALF-CHORUS [*chanting*]

Alas, alas!
O high-vaunting ruin to the race,
fatal Furies, who have destroyed
the race of Oedipus so utterly—
What will happen to me? What shall I do?
What shall I plan?
How shall I be so heartless
not to mourn for you,
not to give escort to your funeral?

(The Second Half-Chorus stands with Ismene around Eteocles' corpse.)

SECOND HALF-CHORUS [*chanting*]

But I fear the dreadful authority
of the people: I turn to avoid that.
You shall have many mourners:
but that one, poor wretch, shall go unwept
save for his sister's single dirge.
Who would believe all this?

FIRST HALF-CHORUS [*chanting*]

Let the city do or not
what it will to the mourners of Polynices.
We here will go and bury him;
we will go as his escort.
This grief is common to the people,
yet now one way and now another
the city approves the path of justice.

SECOND HALF-CHORUS [*chanting*]

But we will go with the other, as the city
and justice jointly approve.
For next to the Blessed Ones and the strength of Zeus
it was he above all who saved the city
of the Cadmeans from being engulfed
by the wave of foreign invaders,
and from complete destruction.]

(Exit all.)